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RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN 6636
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 4396
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RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 7557
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 1617
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DEPARTMENT FOR PA, NEA/ARN, INR/IC/CD, INR/R/MR:STHIBEAULT AND
JMCCARTER, VOA NEWS CA, NEA/PPD:CBOURGEOIS, AZAIBACK, AND
AFERNANDEZ, IIP/G/NEA-SA MDAVIDSON
WHITE HOUSE FOR NSC
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TAGS: KMDR PREL KPAQ OPRC SY

SUBJECT: Syria/US, Baghdad Conference, Syria/Iran, ICG,
Syria/Belgium, Abbas-Olmert Summit, Arab Summit, Bush's Visit to
Latin America (3/12)

¶1. Summary: Syrian independent al-Watan on Mar. 12 reported that Ellen Sauerbrey, US Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration, arrived to Damascus late Mar. 11 for talks on the issue of Iraqi refugees. Earlier, Washington noted that Sauerbrey would talk only about the Iraqi refugee issue. Sauerbrey declined to give any statement upon her arrival in Damascus, but al-Watan learned that she will meet Faisal Miqdad, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, and other senior Syrian officials.

Al-Watan also quoted informed Syrian sources as saying that the American and Syrian delegations exchanged views during the Baghdad Conference. The sources expressed Syria's conviction that a dialogue between them is in the interest of both sides and "that any Syrian-American dialogue must include all regional issues and not only Iraq, due to the importance of these issues, all of which are intertwined."

On Syrian-Iranian relations, Syrian papers reported that President Asad reviewed on Mar. 11 with Iranian Defense Minister Mustafa Mohammad Najjar the latest regional developments, cooperation between the Syrian and Iranian armies and means of bolstering the ties of friendship between the two sides.

Papers also reported that President Asad received on Mar. 11 a delegation of the International Crisis Group (ICG) headed by former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans. President Asad reviewed Syria's vision of current events in the region and the peace process in the Middle East, reiterating the importance of continued communication between the two sides to crystallize mechanisms and means that will help achieve the aim of a just and comprehensive peace based on international resolutions and the land-for-peace formula. The ICG also held talks with Vice President Farouk Shara. Shara confirmed that "the tension and crisis the region and the world are witnessing nowadays are because of the defect in international relations caused by unilateral policy and ignoring of international resolutions." Shara renewed Syria's determination to cooperate with efforts aiming to achieve security and stability in the region.

All papers featured an interview on al-Jazeera TV with Belgium's

Foreign Minister Karel de Gucht on Mar. 12, in which he said that Syria contributed to the agreement to form a Palestinian National Unity Government. De Gucht added that Syria is cooperative with respect to Iraq and insuring Iraqi stability, pointing out that Syrians have welcomed more than one million Iraqi refugees and given them the help they need. On the other hand, de Gucht underlined that Serge Brammertz, head of the International Investigation Commission, praised Syrian cooperation in the probe into the assassination of the former Lebanese PM Rafik al-Hariri, adding that the Syrians also feel at ease with his way of investigating.

End of summary.

12. Selected Headlines:

"President Asad discusses cooperation between the Syrian and Iranian armies with Iranian Defense Minister Mustafa Mohammed Najjar and confirms to members of the Executive Bureau of the Palestinian Writers Union the importance of activating the Palestinian cause, starting from the refugees' right of return" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 3/12)

"President Asad reviews with the International Crisis Group Syria's vision of current events in the region and the peace process in the Middle East" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 3/12)

"Former US Secretary of State James Baker: Including Syria in Middle East issues has become imperative today" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 3/12)

"Belgian Foreign Minister Karel de Gucht: Syria is a cooperative country" (Government-owned Tishreen, 3/12)

"Abbas and Olmert fail to achieve any progress. Israeli endeavors to fragment the Arab Peace Initiative" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th,

3/12)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"Crucial, Regardless of the Results"

Muhiddin Mohammad, a columnist in government-owned Tishreen, wrote (3/11): "Regardless of the consequences of the international conference on Iraq which is being hosted by Baghdad, it is an important event for the future of Iraq and the region, in both positive and negative directions, for many reasons:

"One: This meeting, which is attended by representatives of neighboring countries including Syria and Iran and the five permanent members of the UNSC, was the result of an American desire, after American hopes to decide the conflict militarily and impose the occupation as a status quo, evaporated....

"Two: Syria and Iran's active participation in this conference is not in response to American or any other international pressure. It is, rather, an old demand by the two countries to activate political option to resolve the crisis, because they are, as they have always stressed, part of the solution and not the problem, as the American and Western media try to imply....

"Three: The conference reflects a change, although limited, in the American strategy in Iraq, which has actually conceded to the 'Baker-Hamilton Report' on Iraq regarding engagement with Iran and Syria and involving them politically in any political process that aims to resolve Iraqi and regional problems....

"We are confident that the American Administration's listening to the voice of reason will change its blind outlook on the problems of the region and its view of Syria, which was and still is concerned about regional security out of its concern about its national security...."

"A Significant Chance"

Ahmad Dawwa, an editorialist in government-owned Al-Thawrah, wrote (3/12): "Failure of the US plan in the region, the defeat of Israel in Lebanon, and the steadfastness of some countries in the face of American and Western pressure grant Arabs a significant opportunity to regain the role that they have abandoned to others for decades....

"The key forces in the region are called upon at this important and decisive juncture to take a different view of the situation and abandon reliance on forces that have done nothing other than spread horror and death in the Arab and Islamic world and attempt to revive denominational conflicts and political differences to serve their own interests and the interests of Israel.... The upcoming Arab summit is required to introduce this change.... Arab leaders are called upon to make decisions that take into consideration political developments and the new American and European positions toward the inclusion of the governments of the region in solutions to the problems of the region. Any failure to approach this with a great deal of responsibility, shrewdness, seriousness, and self-confidence will pose a big threat to the entire region....

"There is an opportunity to regain the Arab role. This opportunity was created thanks to the efforts and sacrifices of the Arab popular majority and a minority of Arab governments. Those who are talking about the danger of the growth of certain roles in the region need to trust their capabilities and have confidence in their peoples in order to fill the vacuum that their absence created...."

"Anger of Millions"

Ali Nasrallah, an editorialist in government-owned Al-Thawrah, wrote (3/12): "President Bush was received with angry protests in Latin America....

"The world and its peoples do not hate the United States or its people. They hate the Bush administration and its stupid policies. The world sympathized with the American people over the 9/11 attacks. And the world can, by instinct, distinguish between stupidity and sensibility and between recklessness and good judgment. Otherwise, what is the meaning of the broad welcome of the Baker-Hamilton recommendations and the Democrat's proposals on Iraq? And why does Bush provoke the anger of millions in this world?"

Corbin